STUNNED INTO DISBELIEF

April 19, 1992

8:30 and 11:00 a.m. Worship Services

John M. Buchanan

Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago

Scripture
1 Corinthians 15:19-26
Luke 23:50-24:12

"...these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them."
-Luke 24:11 (NRSV)

> "There once was an elderly gentleman who had a particularly difficult time staying awake in church. In those days a church officer, called a warden, walked the aisles with a long hickory rod, tapping anyone on the shoulder who went to sleep. One Sunday - I believe it may have been Easter Sunday - when the old man nodded off during the sermon, the warden sternly tapped him on the shoulder with the rod. The old man kept on sleeping. The pastor frowned and the warden tapped the man on the other shoulder with the rod. Still he went on sleeping. The pastor shook his head and frowned again at the warden, and the warden took the long hickory rod and hit the man on the top of the head with it; whereupon the man fell out of the pew into the aisle, face down. He slowly opened one eye, squinted up at the warden and said, 'Hit me again, I can still hear him.'"
> *(see page 2)

The Easter Joke. I made a discovery several years ago that has given me great pleasure, namely that there is an ancient Greek Orthodox tradition about the Easter Joke. On the day after Easter, according to that ancient custom, the people reassemble at the church to tell and hear funny jokes - to commemorate the "Big Joke" God played on Satan on Easter. [See Conrad Hyers, And God Created Laughter, p. 25]

And so before you conclude that this is an altogether too flippant way to begin the most important sermon of the year, please know that I have ancient ecclesiastical tradition on my side. Besides, I borrowed - "stole" might be a little more accurate, actually - that joke from one of our great teachers of preaching, Clyde Fant, who told it from the pulpit of the Chapel at Duke University to introduce a sermon imaginatively entitled

"The Last Laugh" which one might say is an accurate expression of the meaning of this day. *[See William H. Willimon, Last Laugh, p. 151]

Laughter, glorious music, gorgeous flowers, lovely new clothes, even the return of a few brave and wonderful hats... All of it a poor, fumbling attempt to express something that will not quite fit into words, something so incredible that it actually seems to be reduced a bit by too much talking.

The theologians know it. Professor Hans Kung - who has written so persuasively about God and faith and hope - comes to the resurrection of Jesus and says, "language is stretched beyond its limits here." The late Reinhold Niebuhr, perhaps the greatest American theologian, when he was teaching at Union theological Seminary in New York, used to worship at Riverside Church and listen to Harry Emerson Fosdick preach. His wife, Ursula, remembered one Easter morning "engulfed by throngs of avid churchgoers, all dressed up for the occasion" that she expressed her doubts to Dr. Fosdick. And she recalled later what Niebuhr said to her. "Why don't we let the liturgy take care of what we want to say and cannot say? It's better to sing these hopes." [The Christian Century, 4/15/87, p. 357]

So we turn to liturgy, ritual - sacred and secular. The ancient Greeks told jokes in church; the Russians stay up all Saturday night, packed into their churches, holding candles, keeping vigil until dawn; we get up at dawn to shiver and huddle together on the lake shore watching the sun rise as a metaphor for what we believe happened this day. And we send flowers to our dear ones and exchange greeting cards, and color eggs and bring new blossoms into our sanctuaries and some of it is lovely and some of it is silly. The brunch at one of the local hotels which is featuring a "Ninja Easter Bunny" to entertain the children, for instance, walked away with the "Easter Silliness Award." But all of it - sacred and silly - a ritual attempt to express something, some joy, some hope, some yearning deep in our souls for which we do not have words big enough.

It's not unlike exactly what happened 2,000 years ago. After his death on Friday afternoon, Joseph claimed the body, put it in a tomb in his garden. The women - the only ones who had stayed with him throughout his tormented dying - watched the burial and prepared spices and ointments. And then, Luke says, "On the Sabbath, they rested according to the commandments." They did what they were supposed to do. When someone dies, you can count on someone else to start doing dishes, cleaning the house, washing the car. When things fall apart it is good to hold on tight to something that doesn't change. So they kept the Sabbath and at dawn's first light, on the day after the Sabbath, the same women returned to Joseph's garden, to anoint the body of Jesus with spices.

However, the stone was removed from the entrance, the body was gone, and they said that there were two men telling them he had risen from the dead. They rushed back to the room where the eleven disciples were hiding and told what had happened.

What is your favorite Bible verse? "God so loved the world... The Lord is my shepherd... Our father who art in heaven"...? May I nominate a peculiar alternative, at least for Easter Sunday - Luke 24:11? The women have hurried to tell the disciples, have breathlessly spilled out what they experienced at Joseph's garden tomb and, reports Luke, my nominee for verse of the day: "...these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them."

I love that verse. If somewhere in you (even while you are singing the glorious Easter hymns) there is a voice which says: "Just a minute, now. Death is death. Life is wonderful but when it is over, it's over. Whatever happened 2,000 years ago, there is a rational explanation and it won't be resurrection." If you think like that, you are in very good company indeed. The disciples of Jesus didn't believe it either when someone tried to tell them about it.

The first response to the news of the Resurrection - by rational people - was disbelief. Professor Walter Brueggmann writes about this day:

> "We move through the weary, death-ridden days of our lives and come back once again to Easter to be stunned into disbelief, and then beyond disbelief, to be stunned to life, now filled with fear and trembling." [Finally Comes the Poet, p. 11]

That's it, I think. The big mistake today is to moderate and reduce and explain away the Easter claim as a metaphor or symbol: to go away thinking that Jesus was a good man whose ideals live on, that his memory is immortal and his spirit returns like daffodils in the springtime. That's not it at all. Far better it seems to me to be stunned first to disbelief, as his dearest friends were and then to wait and see what happens.

The claim is that God's dear dead son did not stay dead and that, therefore, there are some things you and I can be sure about. There are some fears we can put aside, and there are some wonderful hopes and dreams we can haul out of the dusty corners of our imagination and dress up and celebrate.

What we are here first to remember and celebrate this morning is not the return of spring, but that the world has a way of crucifying its best; that intolerance, bigotry, selfishness, and religious self-righteousness often conspire together to eliminate

love, acceptance, peace and hope. It happened 2,000 years ago and it still happens.

The really heartbreaking thing about the crucifixion of Jesus was not only grief because a dear friend died, but the crushing of their hope, their frail but growing faith that he was right, that he was the truth, that the ultimate power and authority in this world is not the power and authority of Rome, the coercive power of military might or political oppression or even rules and religious restrictions, but love: love that forgives and accepts, love that embraces the unloved and unlovely, love that reaches out to everyone. The real heartbreak of that terrible Friday was the death of that lovely hope.

And so the most stunning affirmation of this day is just this. Because he lives, we know now that love is always stronger than death. That in spite of crucifixion, his 2,000 years ago, or the crucifixions that happen every time hope is defeated by despair, and justice and compassion by selfishness and greed, in spite of crucifixion - there is resurrection - because love is stronger than death.

We are capable of believing that. In fact, it would appear that we are created to believe it, want somehow to believe it. The issue is, of course, firstly a very personal one, is it not! Finally this issue has to do not with life in general but our lives and the lives of our loved ones.

When his elderly mother died, Dutch theologian Henri Nouwen wrote a long letter to his father. He wrote during Holy Week and he tried to put into words, as simply and directly as possible, the meaning of Easter in light of the reality of his mother's death.

> "When mother died it seemed as if death came for the first time. Why? I think because love - deep human love - does not know death. Real love says 'forever.' Love will always reach out to the eternal. Love comes from a place in us where death cannot enter." [A Letter of Consolation, p. 32]

If we didn't love, death would be nothing. If we didn't passionately love life, its end would be easy. If we didn't fall in love with each other, the end of life would be simple. The connection is real. The poets, the mystics and artists and theologians express it.

Edna St. Vincent Milay, about death:

"I do not approve."

Dylan Thomas:

> "Do not go gently... rage, rage against the dimming of the light."

The late Karl Rahner:

> "Death is the absurd arch-enemy of existence." [Ibid, p. 70]

And Nouwen himself:

> "Death is the one event we protest against with all our being." [Ibid, p. 70]

And so, when someone stands up and proclaims that the power of our love or God's, that the power of love is greater than the power of death, it is stunning.

Nouwen wrote his father:

> "...the love that causes us so much grief and makes us feel so fully the absurdity of death is stronger than death itself."

And Madeleine L'Engle, writing with heartbreaking integrity and beauty about the dying of her husband, Hugh:

> "God will not create creatures able to ask questions only to be snuffed out before they can answer them... the joyful God of love who shouted the galaxies into existence is not going to abandon one iota of his creation... so let there be no question, I believe in the Resurrection." [Two Part Inventions, p. 108-109]

When the women came back from the tomb claiming that Jesus was risen, this is the stunning power of that claim.

"They seemed like idle words and they did not believe them," Luke reports. And so it goes. Created for love, we seem too willing to live in despair. Created for hope, our sin is not breaking moral rules, but the tacit willingness to live in resignation.

Jesus Christ is alive. Love lives. There is no need to accommodate to any deadly status quo in your life or in the world. Love is the power of hope and hope is the energy which creates all things new.

The Resurrection didn't change the world, someone noted. It changed people who changed the world. And it still does. Death

is the enemy - and the resignation and hopelessness that are death's products.

Now, we know something about that, about what Paul would call the power of death. We know about the power of hopelessness. We know that hopelessness is deadly, that people who live with despair become violent. We know that the violence which characterizes life in the ghetto is in direct proportion to the depth of hopelessness.

A reporter recently asked a young man who was under arrest for participating in what appeared to be a random drive-by-shooting, how he could do it; how he could risk killing innocent children? "It don't matter," he said. "We all be dead soon anyway." He is fifteen. He knows about the power of hopelessness.

And we know the same dynamic personally, how despair expresses itself in destructive behavior - chemical addiction, eating disorders, unhealthy relationships, workaholism. Hopelessness is deadly.

And we also know about the power of hope. The products of death are resignation and hopelessness, but St. Augustine said that hope has two lovely daughters: anger at the way things are and courage to change them.

So be a disciple. Don't take my word for it. Don't take anybody's word for it. Words are idle. See the power of hope; see it wherever people struggle for justice; see it in the Cabrini Green mother who will not give up on her children; see it in the teacher in the dismal, underfunded urban school; see it in a young adult tutoring a child; see it in the churches which will not give up; see it in the cancer patient cheerfully talking about the future; see it in men and women who will not relinquish their hope, not cease striving for a better world.

Don't take my word for it. Look around. Better yet, do something. My guess is that everyone of us has allowed despair and resignation to capture our spirit, and that for everyone of us there are places where we need to act in love and hope and commitment.

The friends of Jesus celebrated the Resurrection not by sitting around discussing its biographical probabilities but when they left the room in which they were hiding and ventured out into the world to start following him. And so I bid you today.

Follow a risen Lord. There is power in hope. There is nothing in this world more powerful than love - your love and God's love in your love. God's love which has conquered death.

This can all be very abstract... pleasant, but not terribly connected to the world of work and relationships and leisure, the busy, routine life we live most of the time.

But then it becomes personal and it stuns us with its power.

C. S. Lewis fell in love in middle-age, married the woman he loved; she fell gravely ill and died shortly after. The play "Shadowlands" tells the story. Lewis wrote about it later in a little book, A Grief Observed.

> "Once very near the end I said, 'If you can - if it is allowed - come to me when I am on my death-bed.' 'Allowed,' she said. 'Heaven would have a job to hold me; and as for Hell, I'd break it into bits.' She knew she was speaking a kind of mythological language, with even an element of comedy in it. There was a twinkle as well as a tear in her eye. But there was no myth and no joke about the will, deeper than any feeling that flashed through her." [p. 63]

Lewis doesn't try to explain. The women couldn't explain it, or even understand it. All they could do - all any of us can do - is confess it quietly, or sing or shout it.

Jesus Christ is Risen! And we are, once again, stunned into disbelief... stunned beyond disbelief... stunned into life.